



John Muir Correspondence (PDFs)

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1912-12-30

## Letter from Charles N. Elliot to John Muir, 1912 Dec 30.

Charles N. Elliot

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CHARLES N. ELLIOT  
ARCHITECT  
325 FAILING BUILDING  
PORTLAND, OREGON

December 30, 1912.

Dear Mr. Muir:-

Thank you for your kind letter of the 24th inst. and for your generous offer to see that I obtain a copy of your tribute to E.H. Harriman. I would greatly appreciate your assistance in this, as I fear otherwise, I will not be able to get a copy. I had our City Librarian send for a copy for the Library, and when it came, read it with great interest. I did not ask her (Miss. Isom, our Librarian) to try for a copy for me, as I did not like to get one by round-about methods. Doubleday, Page & Co., however, have the little book for free distribution to libraries only, and none for sale. I am particularly anxious to obtain this tribute to one of America's greatest constructive men, one who not only did things, but who imagined things. Who but a man of great heart and live imagination would ever have conceived the idea of the Alaskan Expedition? That was truly an Homeric idea as smoothly carried into execution as were all of that wonderful man's plans.

I want to tell you how thoroughly I am enjoying your autobiographical chapters, now appearing in the Atlantic. Much in this last chapter reminds me of my boyhood days in Southern Ohio, where I lived on a small farm, doing my share of the haying, milking, tending poultry, making rail fences and later wire fences, hoeing potatoes, and all the multitudinous chores incident to such a life. How I enjoyed it - even the work! I have seen instances of reasoning on the part of farm animals just as convincing as the case of your ox which crushed the pumpkins with his brow. And on the part of the "wee beasties", I have records, in the note books I kept for my own pleasure during the later years in Ohio, showing that birds and the smaller animals possess what seems very like what we call reason in human beings. I know that they possess deeper feelings than most humans. There was the case, for example, of the two little indigo buntings found dead by the grassy lane on my father's place, one mangled by some thoughtless boy's deadly "sling-shot", the other lying with his head on his mate's body, and with not a mark of violence upon him. It made us weep, who discovered them. If that was not a clear case of broken-heart, or death from intensity of grief, I cannot think of any other reasonable explanation.

I have copied a few extracts from one of my note books for a friend in the East, and made a few carbon copies, one of which I enclose, thinking you might be interested by such glimpses of Ohio Valley life as I have transcribed.

One thing you mention in your last Atlantic chapter, which I have found mention of in very few of our nature books, the omission of which has always appeared strange to me, is the description of the "lightning-bugs". Your word picture brought to memory the rich meadow on my father's place, over which floated every summer evening a myriad throng of these strange and wonderful insects. Who has ever been able to analyze the chemistry of their fitful fire? Such explanations as I have found, fail utterly to satisfy me as to this nervous phosphorescence.

I am sending you under another cover a little calendar, the head on which was painted by Romaine, my daughter. She has never had an art lesson in her life, but does well I think.

With the Season's best greetings and affectionate regards,

Faithfully yours,  
Charles N. Elliot

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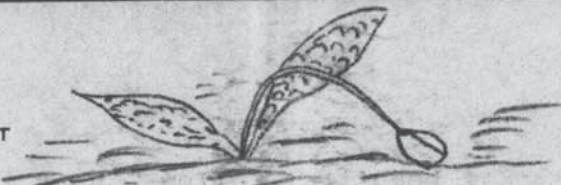


P.S. - Since writing my letter to you, I've had one  
my daughter wrote her grandmother, back in Cincinnati;  
Ollie, and feel that you will be interested to read how  
well the child writes. Here is the passage: -

"Selecting the Christmas tree is a family affair with  
us. Tho' we live within walking distance of the business  
section of Portland, three minutes & a pair of strong legs will  
take us into 'the forest primordial'. We didn't select one of the  
antiquarian trees for our Xmas tree, however. I wish, dear  
Grandma, that you could see these wonderful old forest monarchs.  
They seem to pierce the sky when they crown a hill-top. And  
they stand so majestically, like warriors that neither sun, nor  
storm nor snow can conquer. They point one's thoughts ever  
to the higher, nobler things, and yet they shelter the fragile,  
tender flowers and ferns at their feet - never too absorbed with  
seeking Heaven to forget their duty to their earth-born companions.  
A wonderful example."

Just rec'd a delightful, long letter from Mr. Clara Barrus,  
whose Craftsman article descriptive of her day with you has  
given me keen pleasure. She sends me the first draft M.S. of  
an article on John Burroughs - as yet unpublished - entitled  
"Back to Peabody" - wonderfully interesting and full of that  
cheerful personal quality which makes her writing so about  
her friends so valuable. C.N.E.





Copied verbatim from one of the note books which I used to keep for my own pleasure, when I lived, years ago, in the beautiful valley of the Little Miami in Southwestern Ohio.

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Sat. April 23, 1897:- Past week has been a very changeable one. Last three days have been oppressively warm. The foliage of trees & undergrowth is rapidly putting forth after the long delay caused by the cold weather. Change very sudden and very great - from quite cold weather to sultry days.

Today bright, warm, sunshiny and breezy. Large masses of up-piled cloud scenery in sky - fleecy and with ~~great~~ great apparent depth.

Noted a peculiar insect out in rear of house - about size of bumble-bee, which it resembled except for a dried-up, skeletonized look as of the shadow or ghost of a bee, it hummed on invisible gauze wings over last year's iron-weed blooms - a shadow bee, gathering mythical honey from the ghosts of the gorgeous purple flowers that were.

The swallows have been about for three days now. Last Wednesday evening, coming up the hill from the train, I heard and recognized the "chitter-chitter" of swallows overhead, and sure enough, far up above the tree-tops I discovered three of these active flyers. Have seen the same (?) three birds every evening since, also in the mornings - but no others yet.

Out across-lots to Spooner's woods to the S.W. of our house to seek for "fawn-lily" seed pods for John Burroughs as I promised him a year ago I would do. Found several, but all too green yet. Many of the pods have been either broken off the stem or eaten into by some insect near the base of pods. Noticed that nearly every pod, instead of being supported upright in the air by its stem, drooped over until pod lay ~~on the~~ <sup>(See above)</sup> ground, generally hidden from sight under the leaves, thus! - evidently the plant's method of sowing its seed - the pod covered entire the seed dropped and covered by leaf-mold.

A beautiful slope covered with deep rich grass - the new leaves shooting up thru last year's remains, making a thick cushion carpet, into which the foot sinks to the ankle - over this arches the low scraggy apple trees, and their just opening blossoms make the air heavy with perfume. Cedars mingle their dark foliage with the tender green of new-born leaves on the budding deciduous trees. The low-sinking sun casts a mellow ~~light~~ and refining light over and thru the trees, deepening the darkness of the evergreens and making lighter the pale green of the new leaves. Cardinals flash their brilliant scarlet across the sun-shot and shadowy vistas, some uttering their call and others whistling an even-song. Suddenly, over the scene, comes floating the golden song of the wood-thrush, its liquid-leisurely notes falling in perfect accord with the scene and hour upon my 'raptured ear. I follow the notes - a siren strain - down the soft, sweet-smelling slope, across a narrow meadow where hundreds of violets mingle their rich blues and purples with the greens of the sward, over to the creek bank. Still the sweet strains continue, and I locate definitely the spot where the music originates, but cannot, even with my glass, make out the singer, who sits high up in the huge hickory tree near Hendricks' house. A farm wagon finally frightens him and he flies down to the creek bed, a few hundred feet away. Following, I find him at last running along the sandy bank, dodging under the grasses and sedges, picking up a supper and offering musical thanks therefor alternately.

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